

# Day 3

## NEEDY PEOPLE: THE POOR IN SPIRIT

*For he shall deliver the needy when he cries;  
the poor also, and him that has no helper  
(Ps 72:12).*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven  
(Mt 5:3).*

“Blessings!” This word is used nine times in the Beatitudes. In modern times this word is regularly used to say “farewell” in everyday conversations and emails. Many who use this word are unaware of its proper meaning.

Only God naturally dwells in the state of constant well-being which can be described as “blessedness” or “happiness.” God created the universe and all the good things in it in order to prepare a place where man could share His blessedness. God’s initiative put Adam in a special place of blessing, called the Garden of Eden, where man could meet God and enjoy His fellowship. Today, whenever any of us benefit from the goodness of creation, we partake of only a small portion of the original blessings which God had intended for us to enjoy.

All blessings ultimately come from God. The blessings which come from men are temporary. God's spoken blessing cannot be turned aside or minimized by anyone else; He will always perform the good which He has spoken (Nm 23:19).

In the Old Testament, two ideas are regularly translated by the word "blessed." The first idea refers to the kneeling position in which one would normally receive a blessing and the words of promise, praise, or congratulation which would be said during the blessing. Therefore, this idea is often translated as "speaking well" of another. Thus, the ancient Greeks would describe God's continual state of blissfulness as a place of which only "good could be spoken."

The second idea used in the Bible refers to the "happiness" caused by righteousness, that is, the uprightness of an obedient heart. This notion which describes someone as happy or blessed is used to name "Asher," Leah's sixth son: "Leah says, 'Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed': and she called his name Asher" (Gen 30:13). (Maybe Leah is also happy that Zilpah, her handmaiden, bore this son for her).

In Scripture, this second idea of blessedness describes the "happiness" which comes from obedience to God's commands:

Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law [Torah] of the LORD (Ps 1:1-2).

In Matthew 5:3-12, Christ introduces the people who will accept His New Covenant and its benefits. First of all, these New Testament believers will be blessed when they receive God's gift of salvation. Secondly, as just noted, these believers will be blessed ("happy") as they obey God's commands. Thus, the first four Beatitudes describe those who will receive the salvation ministry of the Messiah. The final five Beatitudes describe those who are obedient citizens in the Messiah's Kingdom of Heaven. They will be happy because the Messiah will bring them to a place of blessing similar to the Garden of Eden and into fellowship with God like that originally enjoyed by Adam and Eve.

### **Nine Characteristics Described by the Beatitudes**

In the prologue to the New Covenant, the Beatitudes describe nine characteristics of people who will receive its covenant blessings. (Mt 5:3-16). These nine characteristics describe the spiritual condition and work of those who will be blessed citizens in Christ's Kingdom.

Not one of these characteristics refers to ancestry, birth, or nationality. What qualifies these people for God's New Covenant blessings are 1) their spiritual needs, 2) their reconciliation to God, and 3) their work for Christ's Kingdom. The emphasis of these characteristics points to the Messiah's ministry. Thus, Christ's Kingdom is exclusive, but not because of heritage; citizenship and blessing in His heavenly Kingdom are limited to those who will accept His messianic ministry.

### **The Four Needy Characteristics**

The first four characteristics of the Beatitudes introduce the needy people who will receive the ministry of the Messiah: the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, and those desiring righteousness. Christ calls these needy people to receive His salvation.

In complement, all four of these needy characteristics also refer to the ministry of the Messiah. Each characteristic points to specific remedies which the Old Testament said the Messiah would provide.

And so, Christ's invitation is open to all who are needy, regardless of heritage or nationality. Anyone who recognizes his need and desires the satisfaction and blessings that Christ the heavenly King offers is invited to accept the Messiah's ministry and, by doing so, become part of His Kingdom.

#### **1. The Poor in Spirit:**

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3).*

Christ introduces the Beatitudes with the phrase "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The "poor in spirit" is the first of four descriptions

concerning the miserable condition of needy people before they are blessed by the saving work of the Messiah.

The characteristic of being “poor in spirit” describes someone who recognizes the fact that only God can meet his spiritual needs. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, man has been unable to save himself from the bondage of sin. Man’s good works cannot fix the problem caused by his sin. Thus, one who is poor in spirit recognizes that he has no currency with which he can procure the salvation of his spiritual life.

Many Psalms illustrate the various needs of the poor and the many kinds of physical and spiritual salvation which only God can provide:

The poor commits himself unto you; you are the helper of the fatherless (Ps 10:14).

This poor man cried; and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles (Ps 34:6).

You, O God, have prepared of your goodness for the poor (Ps 68:10).

But I am poor and sorrowful: let your salvation, O God, set me up on high (Ps 69:29).

For he shall deliver the needy when he cries; the poor also, and him that has no helper (Ps 72:12).

For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me (Ps 109:22).

I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread (Ps 132:15).

Today, we often fail to understand that God provides for every “salvation” need, not just our salvation from sin. Many believers in the Old Testament recognized that God provided “salvation” for all their needs. For example, when Hannah needed a son, God brought her salvation by providing her with Samuel (1 Sam 2:1, 5). In another example, when David was in great danger, he feigned madness to escape Abimelech; but “the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps 34:6).

### **Righteousness is Not from Good Works**

A common mistake is to believe that one's good works can make one righteous enough to merit an inheritance in Heaven. The one who relies on his own self-righteousness is not "poor in spirit."

Adam's son Cain is an example of one who made this mistake and was not "poor in spirit." Cain thought that he could rely on his own good works to procure his salvation. When Cain brings the fruit of his labors from his garden and offers them as an atoning sacrifice to cover his sin, God rejects his self-righteous works. God gives Cain another chance to offer an innocent lamb, the blood sacrifice of another to atone for his sin; but Cain refuses and is driven out of the presence of God and becomes a fugitive and a vagabond (Gen 4:3-14). Cain was not "poor in spirit," because he thought that his good works could procure his salvation.

Paul explains this error to the Ephesians:

For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:8-9).

The Ephesians in Paul's day were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, and similar to Cain, many thought that their virtue and good works could merit them God's favor and blessing. Paul plainly states the reason why one's good works cannot earn salvation: "so that no one can boast" of earning salvation by his own righteousness. Instead, salvation is a gift from God which is received when one trusts in Christ as his Savior.

Jude, the brother of Christ, warns against going down the same ungodly path as Cain:

Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core (Jude 11).

Cain is an example of one who knew what God required of him, but rebelled against God's authority, and tried to obtain salvation by his own righteousness.

John the Apostle also points to the example of Cain in order to illustrate how the self-righteous of this world will hate believers, and conversely, to teach that believers should love one another:

For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you (1 Jn 3:11-13).

God says that the self-righteousness of the world and their good works are evil, which means that their works are corrupted as a result of sin. Man's good works are evil because they lead him away from God and His provision of salvation through Christ.

### **Righteousness is Not from Works of the Law**

In the illustration of the self-righteous Pharisee and the poor publican (a tax collector), Christ provides examples of one who is not "poor in spirit" and of another who is. The Pharisee in this example is the one who is not "poor in spirit." While the Pharisee does rightly in that he keeps the Law of Moses, he mistakenly thinks that his obedience to the Law makes him deserving of God's favor. Thus, He praises himself in his prayers because he is not a sinner as other men:

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank you, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Lu 18:11-12).

This Pharisee is counting on his own good works, the self-righteousness earned from keeping the Law of Moses, to gain him favor from God and make him "rich in spirit."

On the other hand is the poor publican, the sinner whom the self-righteous Pharisee has targeted with his scornful remarks. The publican simply asks God for mercy:

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast,

saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted. (Lu 18:13-14).

The publican knows that his own righteousness cannot justify him; so he throws himself on the mercy of God and relies on God alone for his salvation. The publican is “poor in spirit.”

Even though the Law of Moses was given so that the Israelites could be a righteous people, holy unto God, the righteousness which they earned by keeping the Law of Moses was not intended to be a means of salvation. Instead, the righteousness earned by obedience to the Law of Moses was meant to help them to maintain their fellowship with God. An Israelite’s fellowship with God continued as long as he faithfully obeyed God’s commandments. No one has ever earned salvation by keeping the Law of Moses.

### **Righteousness is a Gift Received by Faith**

God describes salvation from sin and the provision of His righteousness as a gift received by faith in God’s promise. God’s view of salvation is given in His description of Abraham’s salvation, the quintessential example of salvation. Abraham did not obtain salvation because of his obedience to God’s commands to leave his country, his kindred, and his father’s house, or by going to the Promised Land (Gen 12:1). Abraham obtained salvation by believing in the promises of God’s word, (Gen 15:4-5); then God accounted Abraham’s faith for righteousness (Gen 15:6).

Paul uses Abraham’s salvation to explain how the Israelites might boast if their salvation (justification) could be earned by keeping the Law of Moses. Since Abraham was not under the Law of Moses and was not justified by works of Moses’ Law, neither can anyone else obtain salvation as a reward for keeping the Law of Moses (Rom 4:1-4). Salvation can be obtained only by grace (a gift) through faith (belief): “But to him that does not work, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom 4:5; cf. Eph 2:8-9). Paul goes on to explain that God’s forgiveness of sin and place of blessing is not

exclusively for the Israelites, but is available to all, even to the uncircumcised Gentiles, who will come to God by faith (Rom 4:6-9).

The glory of the name of the LORD will be declared and known throughout the earth (Rom 9:17). Not only has Christ called the Jews, He has also called Gentiles to serve Him (Rom 9:24). The Gentiles who were not God's people are now included as children of God:

I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. . . . You that are not my people: there shall be called the children of the living God (Rom 9:25-26).

Thus, the "poor in spirit" is one who realizes that his own "righteousness is as filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Human righteousness is worthless and without merit in God's eyes. This one who is poor in spirit has no choice but to rely on God alone to save him.

In her prayer, Hannah sings of God's deliverance of the poor: "He raises up the poor out of the dust . . . to set them among the princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory" (1 Sam 2:8).

In Jeremiah, when God promises the New Covenant, He describes the poor and needy scattered throughout the earth who will become His New Covenant people:

The people who were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness. . . . Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travails with child together: a great company shall return thither (Jer 31:2, 8).

**The needy citizen who recognizes his spiritual poverty, having no means with which to procure his salvation, will have a place of blessing in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

Memory verses:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3).

This poor man cried; and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles (Ps 34:6).